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SUBJECT: SARG IMPLEMENTS TRAVEL BAN TO PREVENT "FUTURE KHADDAMS"

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In the wake of former VP Abdul Halim Khaddam's press campaign that began in late December, the SARG implemented a travel ban on an undetermined number of current and former officials and military officers. Former PM Mustafa Miru and his family, as well as relatives of deceased Minister of Interior Ghazi Kana'an are reportedly among those who have been prohibited from leaving the country. One contact characterized the measure as a "panicked overreaction," an indication of how much Khaddam has rattled the regime. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The SARG has implemented a travel ban against certain former and current officials that it deems to be a threat to the regime, according to a range of contacts. The ban was apparently implemented after former VP Khaddam's public criticism of the regime angered and rattled the SARG. Ibrahim Hamidi, Damascus-based bureau chief for al-Hayat newspaper characterized the ban as an understandable precaution to prevent "future Khaddams" or any potential coordination between Khaddam and former officials. Civil-society activist Amr al-Azm was less charitable, referring to the measure as the regime's "panicked overreaction" to Khaddam's remarks. In his view, the regime assessed that post-Khaddam, it had lost the ability "to keep former officials quiet" with the usual inducement of further corruption and the implied threat of retribution, so it needed to move preemptively "to shut people up."

¶3. (C) The most prominent person caught up in the ban so far is former PM Mustafa Miru. When he and his family tried to travel out of Syria in mid-January they were turned around at Aleppo airport. A Damascus-based journalist for the Lebanese daily an-Nahar reported January 25 that Miru had been refused permission to leave the country because of corruption allegations. A letter from Miru to an-Nahar was published the following day, denying that he had been prevented from traveling and threatening to sue the journalist who wrote the story, although contacts dismissed his denial as unconvincing. Family members of deceased Minister of Interior Ghazi Kana'an have also been turned around, according to Hamidi. A former governor of Damascus was also reportedly prevented from traveling.

¶4. (C) It is not clear how many people have been included in the ban. Hamidi speculated that former senior military officers like Ali Duba and other former SARG officials, including senior Ba'ath Party officials, as well as some current officials, like SMI general Rustom Ghazali, are likely candidates. However, Hamidi said he had not seen any

list and could not say with certainty who was on it. He noted that it would not be difficult to surmise who the SARG would put on such a list, saying that it would include people the regime was "sensitive about," i.e., those who represented a potential threat. Some contacts pointed to a much broader ban on foreign travel, with al-Azm saying it reportedly even included most current Ba'ath Party Regional Command figures. It is also not clear how long the ban might stay in place or to what degree it is being modified over time.

¶5. (C) Hamidi and others downplayed any anti-corruption motive as the driving force behind the ban, although the government is obviously using the corruption theme to justify publicly any fallout. The government will also use the threat of an anti-corruption drive, with the potential it carries for prison time, loss of reputation, and confiscation of wealth, as "the weapon of choice" with which to cow former or current officials who might contemplate stepping out of line, said al-Azm.

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